Transforming the Transformation

A post-intentional phenomenological exploration of Montessori teachers engaging in anti-bias and anti-racist teacher self-reflection

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INTRODUCTION

This post-intentional phenomenological study was an attempt to better understand what is produced and provoked (Vagle, 2018) when Montessori teachers engage in anti-bias and anti-racist (ABAR) teacher self-reflection, a critical first step to implementing ABAR teaching practices in an early childhood classroom (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Specifically, I explored what is produced and provoked in the Montessori self and social identity as teachers consider ways of being a teacher that possibly differ with the Montessori teacher identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Montessori teachers often enter the teaching field with a strong sense of a **Montessori social identity** developed through their **transformational teacher education experience** (AMI, 2018a; Malm, 2004), uniting them around a shared knowledge and belief system (Fairclough, 1992). While a social identity can connect individuals and provide security and purpose, it can also limit beliefs and behaviors by producing a prescribed way of being (Foucault, 2010). Research (e.g., Sumison, 2002) has shown that when teachers are confronted with instances that challenge their teacher identity and social practice (Fairclough, 1992), they may experience **dilemmas and uncertainty** (Cuban, 1992; Lampert, 1985) that call their self and social identification as a teacher into question.

The literature reviewed for this research included studies exploring **what it is like to become and to be a teacher** (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Friesen & Besley, 2013) including a specific focus on the development of a Montessori teacher identity as Montessori teacher education uniquely incorporates a transformational process into teacher preparation (e.g., Malm, 2004; Standing, 1957). A review of literature on **teacher identity** broadly was helpful to understand identity theories and how they might be of use in exploring the phenomenon of Montessori teachers engaging in ABAR teacher self-reflection (e.g., Akerman & Meijer, 2011; Britzman, 2003; Green, 2015). Additionally, I reviewed literature on **ABAR teacher development** (e.g., Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Kumashiro, 2002) which I argue should be in dialogue with other teacher identities, including that of Montessori.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

> How might engaging in ABAR teacher self-reflection take shape for early childhood Montessori teachers?

Because of the historical and social intentionalities (i.e., connections between the phenomenon and individual lived experiences) which I predicted could have a role to play in the provoking of the phenomenon, I included secondary questions:

1. What might be produced and provoked when early childhood Montessori teachers engage in ABAR self-reflection?
   a. What might be produced and provoked in their ongoing identity formation?
   b. What might be produced and provoked in their teaching practice?
2. What might be produced and provoked through examination of historical influences (e.g., original Montessori texts, biographies)
3. What might be produced and provoked through examination of social politics (e.g., varied Montessori teacher education programs)
4. What might be produced and provoked through examination of curricular classroom experiences (e.g., a curricular interaction that triggers ABAR reflection).

METHODOLOGY

I used **post-intentional phenomenology** as my guiding methodology (Vagle, 2018). To guide analysis, I used Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) *thinking with theory* and Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of the rhizome to conceptualize the life and growth of the phenomenon. Norman Fairclough's theory of critical discourse analysis served as a tool to deeply explore discursive themes within the phenomenological material (i.e., data). Finally, Foucault's characterization of power and the regime of truth offered a theoretical framework for looking at relations, connections and disconnections at work in the phenomenon.

I conducted 3 ABAR workshops over 4 months, held 2 small group interviews, and conducted final individual interviews after the last workshop. Participant phenomenological material was gathered through audio recordings of workshops and interviews. Additional phenomenological material included workshop artifacts, such as schedules, handouts, and quotes shared with the group by myself and others. Historical material such as Montessori's writing, biographies, current Montessori research, and Montessori organization position statements. By using post-intentional phenomenological methodology, I was able to include my own lived experiences with the phenomenon recorded through post-reflexions (i.e., a process of continual self-reflection in relation to the research process).

PARTICIPANTS

6 Montessori teachers participated in this study and met the following criteria:

- were practicing Montessori teachers or assistant teachers in early childhood (a.k.a. "primary") Montessori classrooms.
- had undergone the AMI teacher education within the past 3 years.

Participant social identities included:

- female, white, Native, Latinx, straight, queer and between the ages of 24 to early 40s.

Each participant worked at a different school with a range of demographics and characteristics:

- Private tuition, various forms of funding and financial assistance
- Affluent families to families living in poverty
- Predominantly white to racially diverse
- Immigrant families
- Urban, suburban
- English, Spanish, Ojibwa, Lakota immersion

FINDINGS

Findings revealed elements of the Montessori social identity that provide meaning and purpose for teachers working towards dismantling oppression as well as limitations in the form of a regime of truth (Foucault, 1977/2010) that can challenge the development of a dialogic identity.

> *iI Maria were here she'd be like Yeah! Let's add this! Perfect! She'd be, like, so into this conversation!*

The Great Woman: Montessori was invoked several times throughout the research to provide leadership through challenging situations. The Montessori social identity adheres followers to their leader – Dr. Maria Montessori - and unites them around a common belief in a more just world made possible through Montessori education. Participants were able to find new meaning in Montessori's words that provided relevant and constructive guidance in their work with children and even meaning and clarity in a chaotic world. Yet, that social identity prevented some from connecting with the larger world of education, isolating those who teach, and attend, Montessori schools even further.

> *You know [the comment] "well that's not Montessori", but ... I heard Julie [AMI trainer] state once in our training and I was like "right on Julie!", it was like "if you're doing what is going to best serve this child than that is Montessori"*

Montessori Truth and Power: While the Montessori social identity has created a community around a shared vision and energized an educational movement, it also has the potential to govern and limit teachers to a single way of being, hindering the ability to merge with other ways of teaching and what can be considered "true Montessori".

> *Aiming for neutrality or aiming for objectivity like they try to tell us to be in training is more harmful that it is helpful because it's not possible, nor is it even desirable really if you think about it, you know, like why would you want to strip yourself of your humanity when looking at children?*

Neutrality: Practicing objectivity and being neutral is a part of the commodification of Montessori teachers and the embodiment of a Montessori teacher social identity. In addition, the constraints placed on teachers to take the position of servant and protector limits the possible forms of explicit *action* against injustice and oppressions that seep into school life.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications suggest recommendations for Montessori teacher education programs including strategies of incorporating ABAR reflective practices into Montessori teacher development, reevaluating the words and position of an adored leader for relevance as society evolves, and encouraging social activism by disrupting the notion of objectivity and neutrality in teaching.

ABAR reflection should be explicitly incorporated into Montessori spiritual preparation.
- Montessori teachers should enter the profession with both a deep understanding of the method and an ability and willingness to evaluate Montessori practice using an ABAR lens that they gained during their teacher transformational experience.

Montessori should be admired, but not adored
- Creating space to consider new possibilities of the method becomes possible when Montessori is no longer positioned as a single hierarchical power. Core tenets of her method may be upheld (e.g., freedom of movement, mixed age classrooms, beauty and order) to guide and influence the evolution of Montessori practices.

Montessori teachers should not be given the impression that they can become, or should be, objective and neutral in their work with children.
- No one can be truly objective, including Montessori teachers. Giving teachers the impression that they can achieve objectivity is misleading and even has the potential to be harmful. A commitment to recognizing and accepting the uniqueness of each child is important for any teacher. However, ABAR teaching also includes a self-awareness that acknowledges the unique perspective a teacher brings to the classroom and to each teacher-student relationship

FUTURE WORK

Phenomena are always moving through the world, so it is not possible to settle on a fixed definition or understanding of this phenomenon of study. The reflections my participants shared during our workshops have likely already evolved, changed, and affected their identities and teaching in new and different ways. Additionally, this research is not meant to be generalizable to the Montessori population at large. Every Montessori teacher has had their own experience of becoming and being a Montessorian, and of course brings their own unique identity to the transformation.

In addition to offering suggestions for further research, I also acknowledge work that has already been initiated on these important topics:

- Investigate the ways in which different individual Montessori teacher education programs have included ABAR related work, if at all, to gain an understanding of the work that needs to be done and to unifying the Montessori approach to ABAR teaching (Kitchens, 2018).
- Explore what ABAR practices exist, if at all, in elementary and adolescent Montessori teaching and how they may be enacted in to bring a cohesive approach to ABAR self-reflection through all program levels (Branch, 2017; Jewell, 2017).
- Assess what is considered best practice ABAR curriculum and how it may be integrated into the Montessori method (Han, 2018; Han & Moquino, 2018; Jewell, 2017; Tift, 2017; Trondson, 2016).

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